

English-Oliver House
845 Ridge Avenue
Pittsburgh
Allegheny County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-425

HABS
PA
2-PITBU
17-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

ENGLISH-OLIVER HOUSE

HABS
PA
2-PIT80
17-

Address: 845 Ridge Avenue, Pittsburgh, Allegheny County,
Pennsylvania.

Present Owner
and Occupant: Instruments Publishing Company.

Present Use: General business office.

Brief Statement
of Significance: Originally built in 1871-74, the house was remodeled in 1892-93 after the designs of the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge. One of the finest of the Pittsburgh millionaires' mansions, it is a good example of the firm's later classical manner, and bears a trace of the Romanesque style in some of the ornamental details.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: The land was originally a part of the Denny and Dubarry estate, and was purchased in 1871 by Andrew H. English, bookseller and printer. The house was completed in 1874 and was occupied by English until acquired by Henry W. Oliver in 1879. Oliver remodeled the structure in 1892-93 and remained there until his death in 1906. The house was briefly occupied by Mrs. Rae, Oliver's daughter and was then turned over to a family charity known as "Bethany House." The property was purchased by the Instruments Publishing Company in 1953.
2. Date of erection: 1871-74.
3. Architect: Original architect unknown. Architects for remodeling were Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge.
4. Notes on known alterations: Extensive remodeling in 1892-93 after the designs of Shepley, Rutan, and Coolidge. The alteration probably followed the general form of the original house, exercising, however, great freedom in the refinement of interior details and planning.
5. Sources of information: James D. Van Trump, "The Romanesque Revival in Pittsburgh," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, XVI, No. 3 (October 1957), pp. 22-29.

Instruments Publishing Company. An Invitation to visit the Instruments Publishing Company. A brochure prepared by the Instruments Publishing Company, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

- B. Historical Persons Associated With Building: The original owner of the house was Andrew H. English, pioneer publisher of modern textbooks for elementary schools. The subsequent owner, Henry W. Oliver, was a leading Pittsburgh industrialist of the late 19th century and is credited as the developer of the iron ore of the Mesabi, a product which made it possible for the United States to assume world leadership in the production of iron and steel.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is one of the finest of the Pittsburgh millionaires' mansions with a trace of the Romanesque style in some of the ornamental details.
2. Condition of fabric: Generally good. There has been some spalling of the exterior stonework but the interior has been carefully maintained to preserve its original character.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Over-all dimensions, layout, etc.: 107'-5" x 55'-9 1/2"; generally rectangular with several slightly projecting bays; five-bay front; two-and-a-half story main block with two-story rear wing
2. Foundations: Coursed ashlar
3. Wall construction: Coursed ashlar (sandstone), light grey in color. Plain wide string course extends around the building at the first floor line. A string course extends around the building at the second floor line (Greck key design around the main block, plain around the rear wing).
4. Structural system, framing: Masonry bearing walls with wood floor and ceiling framing. Principal interior partitions are masonry bearing.
5. Porches: Elevated terrace continuous around the north (front) and west elevations. The original stone balusters and railing have been replaced in sections. Handsome entrance portico - Palladian motif with free-standing

Ionic columns and engaged pilasters enclosed by large masonry piers. Recessed spandrels with decorative foliate motif, surmounted by paneled parapet. The intersecting barrel vaults are surfaced with small inlaid terra cotta tiles.

6. Chimneys: Seven rectangular chimneys in the main block - coursed ashlar with simple cornice molding.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Primary entrance on the north (front) elevation with handsome Palladian portico. Simple double outside doors (vertical glazing with inset panel beneath) with single arched light above. Two secondary entrances, one at the approximate center of the east elevation (single door with light above, all set in tall arched frame) and one at the approximate center of the west elevation (single door with denticulated architrave above). Service door on the east side of the rear wing.
 - b. Windows: Window openings are generally rectangular with round arched heads and stained glass transoms (first floor) and segmental arched heads (second floor), molded stone trim with projecting stone sills and recessed double-hung wood sash. Windows in the rear sections are typically flat head with flush or near-flush stone sills and recessed double-hung wood sash. The center bay on the north (front) elevation projects slightly on the second floor level and has a round arched Tiffany window (egg and dart border) over the entrance portico, frame recessed with double guilloche trim supported by flat pilasters. Three tall round arched openings on the second-floor level of the west elevation between the two projecting semicircular bays; the two openings to the south have recessed wood frames with Tiffany windows (serving the main stair-hall), the northern opening has recessed masonry fill with small two-light rectangular window.
8. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Large hipped roof over front portion of main block. Secondary peaked roofs over the rest of the main block and the projecting bays. Flat roof over the rear wing.
 - b. Cornice: Decorative stone cornice continuous around large hip roof over main block, large projecting cymation supported by scroll brackets

over an egg and dart molding and a row of dentils. Plain cornice (without the brackets and dentils) extends around the lower portion at the rear of the main block. Simple double cymation stone cornice extends around the rear wing.

- c. Dormers: Broad three-light dormers (half-hipped roofs) in roof over front portion of the main block. Smaller one- and two-light dormers in peaked roof over rear section of main block.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Generally rectangular plan with central hallway and flanking rooms. Wide entrance hall extends from the vestibule to the central stair with secondary hallway continuing to the rear of the building. The second and third floors have essentially the same plan although less formal in character. The first- and second-floor levels of the rear wing are several feet lower than those of the main block.
2. Stairways: A handsome open-well main staircase connects the first and second floors (two runs with common landing). Newels and widely spaced balusters have inset carved panels (maces, swords, and shields) with connecting, delicately carved perforated panels (dragons, sphinxes, floral and musical motifs with central cartouches). The stair has a plain closed string with carved foliate brackets under the string of the upper flight. Egg and dart, pearl, and bead moldings are used extensively as borders and accents. The walls of the stairwell are paneled (carved beneath lower run) to a height coinciding with the dado rail on the second floor. Twin Tiffany windows over landing provide rich natural light. Service stair located at the rear of the secondary hallway.
3. Flooring: Matched hardwood flooring throughout.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Handsome oak paneling and trim throughout the first floor. The dados are typically very high with either plaster or tapestry above. The elaborate woodwork makes repeated use of the denticulated cornice, egg and dart, talon, pearl, guilloche, and bead moldings, and foliate, musical, and animal motifs. Richly paneled built-in cabinets occur in several of the rooms. The ceilings are either exposed beams with inset panels or painted plaster. The second floor reflects the character of the first floor although less formal; the dados are typically lower with plaster above.

5. Doorways and doors: Elaborate vaulted vestibule with single inside door (single light, enriched talon border and inset panel beneath, egg and dart border) with arched light above and flanked by side lights (one half the height of the door). All glazing has delicate exterior iron grills. The walls are finished with marble and the vault and vault ends are finished with inlaid terra cotta tile. Other interior doorways have wide architraves with decorative wood carving - richly paneled doors with egg and dart, bead and enriched talon moldings.
6. Decorative features and trim: An outstanding interior feature is the richly carved and paneled woodwork applied to the walls, ceilings, stairway, and fireplaces.
7. Hardware: A variety of handsome brass hardware.
8. Lighting: Modern surface-mounted fluorescent fixtures.
9. Heating: Modern, zoned heating system. Handsome hooded brownstone fireplace in the central hall, fluted pilaster trim supports the battered chimney breast decorated with bands of low relief carving, tile hearth. The fireplaces in the other rooms generally have plain bracketed mantelpieces supported by twin Corinthian pilaster or colonette trim, square openings with marble surrounds and tile hearths.

D. Site

1. Orientation: Situated on the southeast corner of Ridge Avenue and Galveston Street at the geographic high point of what was an exclusive residential district of abundantly wealthy ironmasters, steelmakers, and bankers, the men responsible for the industrial and commercial growth of Pittsburgh during the latter half of the 19th century. The area has been greatly transformed in recent years, the remaining mansions being remodeled to accommodate both business and institutional functions.
2. Outbuildings: A large two-story carriage house is located at the rear of the main structure.
3. Landscaping, enclosures: Bounded on the north and west by steep-terraced banks with retaining walls at the street levels, paved driveway, and parking areas to the south and east.